

Fort Caroline Background Information



Key Terms

Huguenots: Protestants in France who were being persecuted for their religious beliefs.

River of May: located by the French on May 1, 1562 and now known as the St. Johns River.

Gulf Stream: one of Ponce de Leon's most important discoveries, this current made passage from the Americas back to Europe much easier.

Culture shock: a condition of confusion and anxiety that can affect an individual when suddenly exposed to an entirely new culture or way of life.

Massacre: the act of killing a number of human beings cruelly and indiscriminately.



Key People

Jean Ribault: leader of the French expedition to explore southeastern North America; arrived at the River of May in 1562.

René de Laudonnière: Ribault's second in command in 1562; he led 300 French Huguenot colonists back to Florida to settle in 1564 and built the fort.

Pedro Menendez de Aviles: sent by Spain to remove the French trespassers from Florida, which Spain had already claimed.

Jacques le Moyne: French artist who accompanied the 1564 expedition and sketched the animals, plants, people, and events he encountered here. Le Moyne escaped the Spanish attack and returned to France, where he drew from memory the scenes of Florida that were lost during the battle.

Saturiwa: local Timucuan chief who offered friendship to the French and provided help with building the fort and supplying food.



History of La Caroline *(key terms and people shown in bold)*

By founding the Fort Caroline settlement, France attempted to gain a foothold in a part of the New World previously claimed only by Spain. Eventually, these two European countries would fight for permanent control of Florida.

By the 1560s, Spain had claimed Florida but was focusing its economic energy on Central and South America, sending ships filled with valuable goods back to Europe along the **Gulf Stream**, which sped them along the eastern coastline of Florida. At the same time, France was going through a time of religious civil war between the Protestants, known as the **Huguenots**, and the Roman Catholics. Florida became the ideal opportunity to reunite the people of France in two ways: giving the Huguenots a place to settle where they could worship freely and building a base from which to attack the Spanish ships traveling along the Florida coast on their way back to Spain.

In 1562, **Jean Ribault** was sent by France to explore the New World, and on May 1 his ships entered the **River of May**, now known as the St. Johns River. His men erected a column near the river's mouth claiming Florida for France. In 1564, when the French civil war subsided, three vessels left France under the leadership of **René de Laudonnière** to settle in northeast Florida.

The ships arrived at the River of May in June, where they were welcomed by the native population, the Timucuans. A triangular fort was constructed near the river shore and small thatch buildings were constructed to house the settlers. The area was named "la Caroline" in honor of France's 14 year-old king, Charles IX.

Life in the colony turned out to be difficult. The French colonists were unskilled in growing crops or gathering their own food and instead relied upon the Timucuans. The climate was very different from that of France and the people began to suffer from disease and starvation. The people began to complain and some even mutinied, stealing a vessel and sailing south. However, much to the colonists' relief, Jean Ribault returned to Florida in September 1565 with more soldiers, settlers and much needed supplies.

It wasn't long before Spain reacted to the French presence in Florida. **Pedro Menendez de Aviles** received orders to drive the French out of Florida. He scouted the mouth of the River of May and attempted to capture French ships. When that failed he sailed south and established St. Augustine as his base. Ribault tried to sail after the Spanish, but a large storm drove his ships too far south. Menendez decided to take advantage of Ribault's troubles and marched 500 men overland towards Fort Caroline.

Since the French fleet had gone south to try to attack the Spanish, la Caroline was left with only a few able-bodied soldiers. Due to poor weather, the captain sent his guards to their houses, leaving the fort defenseless. Very early that next morning, September 20, 1565, the Spanish attacked. When the Spanish burst into the fort, Laudonnière and his men fought as hard as they could but were overwhelmed. The battle only took one hour. Over 140 Frenchmen had been killed, the women and children spared at Menendez' orders. The fort was renamed San Mateo and some Spanish soldiers remained behind, while the Spanish and their prisoners returned to St. Augustine.

A few days later Menendez found the survivors of the French fleet, which had been largely destroyed by the storm. Five hundred soldiers and sailors, helpless and hungry, were

trapped at an inlet. Approximately 350 surrendered to the Spanish and the rest escaped into the woods. Menendez knew it would be difficult to guard and feed this many prisoners. For this reason, and because he viewed the French Huguenots as heretics, 334 of these Huguenots were executed, including Jean Ribault. The **massacre** site still bears the name Matanzas, which means "slaughters." Soon after, France abandoned its interests in Florida, leaving the land in Spanish hands.

The group most affected by French and Spanish influence was the native Timucuan. As a result of their contact with the Europeans, thousands of Timucuan died of disease. The Spanish mission system also changed Timucuan society through the introduction of Christianity. This combination of the decrease in Timucuan population and irreversible changes in culture resulted in the break down of their traditional society. Within 200 years of the French arrival and Spain's reassertion of claim to Florida, no true Timucuan society remained in northeast Florida.